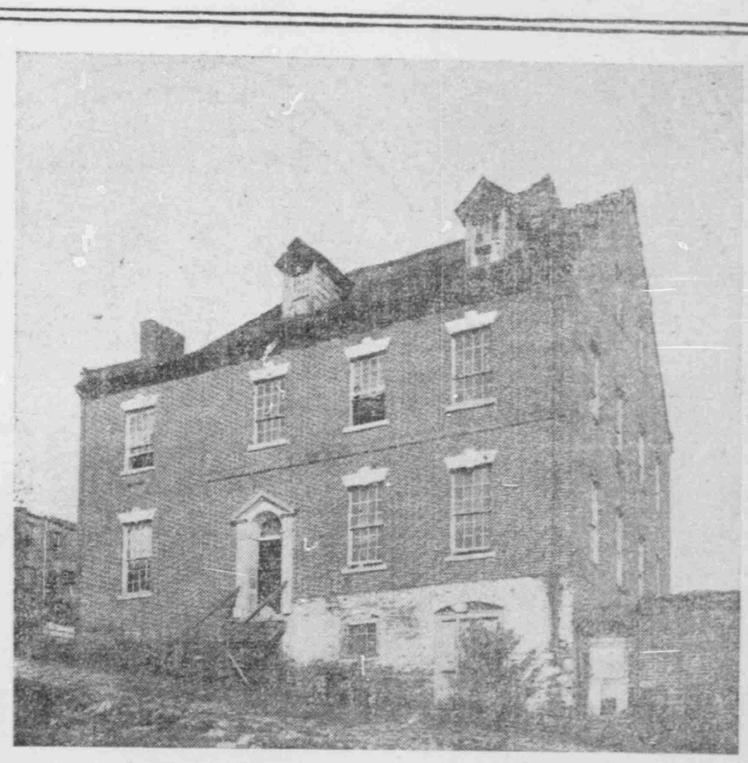
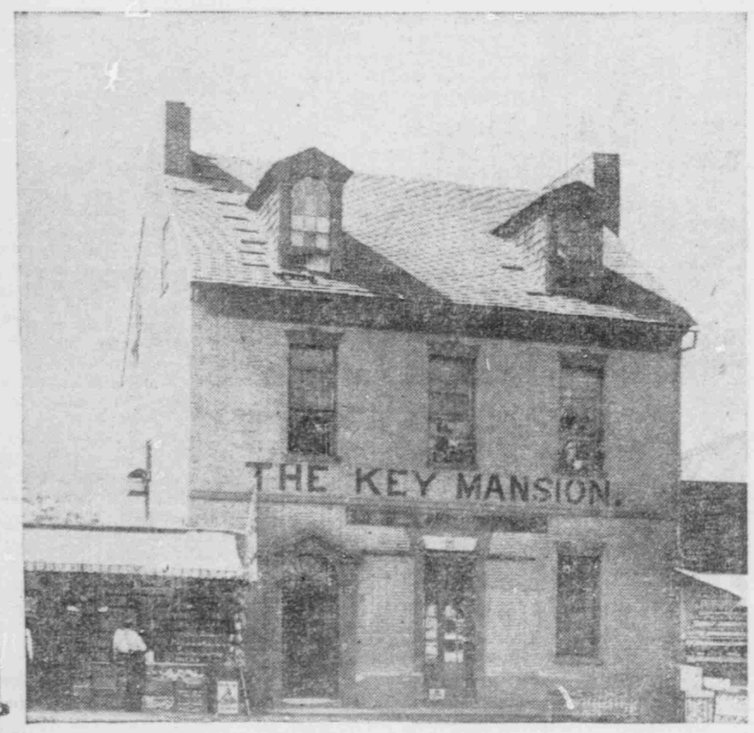
QUAINT BITS OF WASHINGTON OF HISTORIC INTEREST

Washington's Headquarters, M Street, Georgetown.



The Foxall House, Thirty-fourth Street, Georgetown.



The Key Mansion, M Street, Georgetown.

Georgetown Richer in Antique Buildings Than Other Sections of District---Washington's Headquarters While the Survey Was In Progress ---Key Mansion, Foxall House and Ruin of Tavern Still Stand

Duck Lane, Georgetown.

THE commonplace events of today become interesting history when viewed through the mist of the distance of a few years. The unnoticed man of today becomes in a few years the man of destiny, the apostle of a new issue, the leader of a new party, or the new leader of an old party. It is then that all of the events of his early life become full of interest. His early life, his comrades with whom he was on terms of intimacy, his home surroundings, and the house in which he lived are clothed with a new interest.

Of the man, his associates, his home there is but little known. Little by little from various sources this information is collected, and fitted together with such judicious trimming that a good story may not be lessened by the telling for the hundredth time, or a shining virtue dimmed by some skeleton of doubtful origin, and from this patchwork skilfully arranged we of later times read the history of the man and his work.

Peculiar Freaks of History.

What is true of the history of individuals is also true of the history of homes or localities. Little history is written until time has softened all defects, and illumined all of the most important features; in fact, emphasized all that we would most desire to hear, and from this condition we have had such a large number of houses pointed out as places where President Washington was entertained, that we have wondered whether the Father of his Country had much to do beside being entertained. We have been solemnly informed that this house, that house, and the other house was made of bricks brought from England until we have wondered if all of the ships of the mother country were able to carry any other cargoes besides bricks from which to make houses for the colonists, and we have been led to make the inquiry for some suitable reasons why the early settlers did not make bricks for themselves; the material was near at hand, and many brickmakers came to the colonies at an early day, and without doubt were not only competent to make brick, but did make and furnish brick for the numerous houses which are now pointed out as being built of imported material.

Little History Written.

Aside from such obvious inaccuracies as may be discovered in all history not based entirely on records made at the time, there is doubtless a large and interesting amount of history relating to the National Capital and its surroundings which has never been written, for the reason that the events at the time seemed unimportant, and when after developments brought to the public the importance of some of the events of earlier days, the searcher for the facts was unable to find all of the information of which he was in search and has therefore merely given the best that could be obtained.

If those who lived at the time when Washington only existed as a city upon paper had left behind a clearly written statement of the conditions as they then existed; if those who in later years resided here, when the houses were few and the population scattered; at the time when the Tiber Creek and a dozen other unimportant streams divided this city into natural divisions, had left behind them a carefully prepared history of the conditions then existing, the present inhabitant would not be so greatly surprised to know that at one time wood yards in the vicinity of the Baltimore and Ohio depot were supplied with wood brought by boats from the mouth of the Tiber at Seventeenth Street and the river, and that this creek passed the Center Market on its course to the Baltimore and Ohio depot. It would then seem less strange to know that fish were caught along that section of the city known as Pennsylvania Avenue and Tenth Street; that at times there was fishing at the present site of the Masonic Temple; that boys used to hunt in that section of the city between N Street and Florida Avenue, and that a mill was standing near N and North Capitol Streets which was furnished with power from an artificial lake near by.

There is probably no section of that territory now within the limits of the city so rich in historic interest as that part of Georgetown west of Rock Creek and south of N Street. In fact, the territory might well be narrowed down to more circumscribed limits if we are seeking for early history, as the early settlers located their homes near to the river as a matter of convenience, as the river was the connecting link, the means of communication, with all of the great sources of supplies. Water Street was at one time the Wall Street of activity of Georgetown in the days when it was George Town. And at that time even M Street was a little too far away from the center of trade and the chief points of interest.

Georgetown has many historic houses about which little is known, and many have been replaced along Water Street by business houses and their identity wholly lost by the demands of trade. On this account much of the older part of Georgetown has become unrecognizable, and the places where such noted men as President Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and others were wont to assemble, have been imperfectly marked, and much of the history clustering about them is traceable to tradition and imperfect memories.

Washington's Headquarters.

At 3050 M Street there can be found in a good state of preservation an old stone building with low ceilings and a sharp pitched roof, which has been designated by a tablet as the house used by Washington as his headquarters while the survey of the National Capital was in progress. There is also a tradition that children playing in the attic of this little building many years ago found some drawings and plans which seemed to have some relation to the early plans of the city, and on the other hand we are informed that there is no authentic history which points to any occupancy of this house by President Washington on any occasion.

There is also a tradition that this house once stood on the corner of a plantation and that nearby was a fine spring of water. If the house was formerly the home of a plantation owner it may be true that Washington, while a President of the United States, visited this house, for there is abundant historical proof that he visited Georgetown in March, 1791, and conferred with Major L'Enfant concerning the plans of the Capital City; that he at or about this time conferred with the owners of the farms and plantations then within the limits of the proposed territory afterward known as the District of Columbia, and that between the land owners and the President an agreement was effected by which they were to convey their land to the Government for the consideration of £25 per acre. Such portions of their lands as were to be used as streets and avenues were to be donated, and if the land owners wished to reserve such portions of their holdings as were occupied by their buildings they were to be permitted to do so upon the payment of one-half of the estimated value of the lands, provided the buildings were not situated upon any of the streets or avenues of the proposed city.

Fixing Boundaries of the District.

It is also a well known historical fact that President Washington, on March 30, 1791, issued a proclamation setting forth the lines of boundary of the proposed District of Columbia, and as this proclamation is dated at Georgetown it may be that Washington at some portion of the time between the date of his coming and his departure visited the house referred to, for those were democratic times and the nation was looking for a permanent home. Its deliberations had already been held in eight different places in four different States, and if there was any reason why the interests of the nation would be promoted by a visit of its Chief Executive it is quite certain that formalities would have been waived. It may be that a friendly visit was all that was required to convince the plantation owner that the transfer of his land to the Government was the one thing needed to make the scheme for the location of the National Capital an assured success.

On this same street, not far from the Aqueduct Bridge, stands the former home of Francis Scott Key, whose patriotic songs, "The Star-Spangled Banner," has placed him at the head of song writers of his time. About the identity of this house there can be no question, although many of the traditions concerning it seem wholly without foundation. The story that the brick used in its construction came from England seems to be without foundation, in view of the research made into this theory by persons of whose information there remains no room for doubt.

The circumstances under which the song was written are probably familiar to all of the readers of this paper, but it may not be generally known that the author of "The Star-Spangled Banner" is also the author of other verse, among which, a hymn, "Lord, With Glowing Heart I'd Praise Thee," is widely known and in common use among the members of the Episcopal Church, of which the author was a strong adherent.

Lord, with glowing heart I'd praise thee
For the bliss thy love bestows,
For the pardoning grace that saves me,
And the peace that from it flows,
Help, O God, my weak endeavor;
This dull soul to rapture raise;
Thou must light the flame, or never
Can my love be warmed to praise.

In addition to the fame which came to Francis Scott Key as the author of the "Star-Spangled Banner," he also enjoyed a high reputation as a lawyer and served through three terms as United States Attorney for the District of Columbia. During some of the later years of his residence in Washington, he lived in the house now known as 308 C Street northwest. After practicing law for some years in Washington, he moved to Baltimore, and died in that city on January 11, 1843. While his name is closely associated with the early history of this nation, his old home in Georgetown is in the hands of strangers, and his grave at Frederick, Md., is said to be in a condition wholly unbefitting a man so dear to the hearts of the people.

An Ancient Tavern.

In this same historic section of Georgetown, on Thirty-fourth Street, between the canal and Water Street, is the former home of the Rev. Henry Foxall, who combined the occupation of a gunmaker with that of a Methodist minister.

The building is an old one, having been erected in 1795, and Thirty-fourth Street has long ago ceased to be a thoroughfare of any prominence. The steep grade, with the roadway paved with flat paving stones, makes one wonder whether this was ever intended for the purpose of traveling in more than one direction—and that down hill. The house has been allowed to go the way of all houses in an unpopular section of the city, but it will always be interesting as the home of the Methodist gunmaker who made Foundry Church glad with his liberal gifts.

Not far from the Foxall house and near to that section of Water Street, between Thirty-second and Thirty-third Streets, the visitor will find a small alley leading up the hill toward the canal. On the east side of this alley, locally known as "Duck Lane," is the ruin of an old tavern of the ancient time. This belongs to the day of the stage coach, to the day when the telegraph and the railroad were unknown. This section was then in the elite portion of Georgetown, and while the hotel has long been abandoned for other purposes, and the dwellings along Water Street have been converted into factories and warehouses, this old stone inn of the older time, with its covered drive into the stable yard in the rear, has doubtless furnished refreshment to many a notable in the very early days of the nation. Even the tradition that Washington has been a guest within its walls is not wanting.

Van Ness Mansion.

The well-known mansion of Gen. John P. Van Ness, on Seventeenth Street, has often been the subject of newspaper paragraphs. Without the undoubted history of this mansion, it would, in its present half ruined condition, be difficult to understand that at the time of its erection it was considered the most expensive residence in the country, having been erected at a cost of about $75,000 under the supervision of Latrobe, the then famous architect.

This residence is also said to be the first in the country to be supplied with hot and cold water in all of the rooms on both floors, and its furnishings were in full keeping with the cost of the building.

Its owner, General Van Ness, was at one time a member of Congress from the State of New York, and a man of good family, and possessed of abundant means in his own right. His wealth was considerable for those early times, and his marriage to Miss Marcia Burns, the daughter of David Burns, one of the original proprietors of the land now occupied by the city of Washington, added considerably to the wealth at his disposal.

Van Ness was a man of business and was prominently identified with the early business interests of Washington. At one time he was the president of the Bank of the Metropolis. His military title seems to be based on the fact that at one time he was a brigadier general of the District Militia, at about the time, or a little after, the war of 1812. The residence on Seventeenth Street was erected in 1820, and the grounds occupied a whole square, and included the site of the old homestead of David Burns, a plain frame structure, which was removed a few years ago. The square containing the Van Ness mansion was locally known as Mansion Square. Prior to the erection of this magnificent home, General Van Ness lived on Eleventh Street, between C and D Streets.

The marriage of Arthur Middleton, of South Carolina, to Miss Ann Albertina, the only daughter of General Van Ness, in 1821, was one of the notable society events of the time. The groom was a grandson of one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Six bridesmaids and six groomsmen assisted at the wedding, and the festivities were continued for nearly a month, as each of the bridesmaids gave a party and each of the groomsmen gave a dinner. The mansion of General Van Ness was noted during the period commencing in 1820 for its generous hospitality, for the proprietor was well known in local and national circles. His wife was a charming hostess, and many distinguished men and women of that early period were entertained in the old mansion, which for many years has been practically abandoned and is fast going to decay.

Old Lock House.

Farther down Seventeenth Street we may find an old lock house, a landmark of the days when the canal wandered through the lower portion of the city and divided off the section below it into what was then known as "the island," a term still occasionally used by those who knew Washington in the early times.

With the filling up and removal of the canal most of the old canal landmarks have disappeared, and the old lock house is following in the footsteps of so many of those that have passed away and whose former locations are being rapidly forgotten.

CHARLES E. FAIRMAN.